



**STUDYDADDY**

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# When I Was Growing Up

Nellie Wong

I know now that once I longed to be white.

How? you ask.

Let me tell you the ways.

when I was growing up, people told me  
I was dark and I believed my own darkness  
in the mirror, in my soul, my own narrow vision  
when I was growing up, my sisters  
with fair skin got praised  
for their beauty, and in the dark

I fell further, crushed between high walls  
when I was growing up, I read magazines  
and saw movies, blonde movie stars, white skin,  
sensuous lips and to be elevated, to become  
a woman, a desirable woman, I began to wear  
imaginary pale skin

when I was growing up, I was proud  
of my English, my grammar, my spelling  
fitting into the group of smart children  
smart Chinese children, fitting in,  
belonging, getting in line

when I was growing up and went to high school,  
I discovered the rich white girls, a few yellow girls,  
their imported cotton dresses, their cashmere sweaters,  
their curly hair and I thought that I too should have  
what these lucky girls had

when I was growing up, I hungered  
for American food, American styles,  
coded: white and even to me, a child  
born of Chinese parents, being Chinese  
was feeling foreign, was limiting,  
was unAmerican

Chrystos

when I was growing up and a white man wa  
to take me out, I thought I was special,  
an exotic gardenia, anxious to fit  
the stereotype of an oriental chick

when I was growing up, I felt ashamed  
of some yellow men, their small bones,  
their frail bodies, their spitting  
on the streets, their coughing,  
their lying in sunless rooms,  
shooting themselves in the arms

when I was growing up, people would ask  
if I were Filipino, Polynesian, Portuguese.  
They named all colors except white, the shell  
of my soul, but not my dark, rough skin

when I was growing up, I felt  
dirty. I thought that god  
made white people clean  
and no matter how much I bathed,  
I could not change, I could not shed  
my skin in the gray water

when I was growing up, I swore  
I would run away to purple mountains,  
houses by the sea with nothing over

my head, with space to breathe,  
uncongested with yellow people in an area  
called Chinatown, in an area I later learned  
was a ghetto, one of many hearts  
of Asian America  
I know now that once I longed to be white.  
How many more ways? you ask.  
Haven't I told you enough?



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